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Iranian Reaction to the Iraqi Election

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Iran's and the United States' differences are complex and include the Iranian nuclear program, support of terrorism and the Iranian government's authoritarian lock on the political process. As President Bush stated in his State of the Union Speech,

Today, Iran remains the world's primary state sponsor of terror, pursuing nuclear weapons while depriving its people of the freedom they seek and deserve. We are working with European allies to make clear to the Iranian regime that it must give up its uranium enrichment program and any plutonium reprocessing and end its support for terror. And to the Iranian people, I say tonight: As you stand for your own liberty, America stands with you. ¹

Three decades of bad relations are now focused on events in Iraq. Ironically, both governments agree that the Iraqi elections were a good thing. The motives, however, are rather different. The United States emphasizes the success of the democratic process. Iran sees the recent Iraqi elections as a means to increased its regional influence and accelerate the withdrawal of American military power from Iraq. United States government also views the election processes as a necessary step toward its eventual military disengagement but also sees in the success pf the process an inherent challenge to all authoritarian regimes in the region, including Tehran.

From Tehran's perspective, the US presence in the region is really a mixed blessing. US forces in Afghanistan and Iraq are on Iran's Eastern and Western borders and are the military component of a continuing policy of containing Iranian power. These forces curtail Iranian freedom of action and threaten the regime. However, the US also has destroyed two Iranian foes—the Taliban regime and the Saddam Hussein Baathist regime. Iran now has greater influence in Western Afghanistan's Herat Province and Iraq is powerless.²

The Iraqi Shia clergy is a new, significant element in Iraqi politics, influencing 60% of the electorate. A Persian proverb states, "If it is God's will, the enemy will aid us." The US unintentionally expanded Iranian influence when allowing Iraqi Shia to assume legitimate political power. In the long term, this Shia ascendancy will serve Iranian interests better than the

interests of the US. The election empowered Iraqi Shia who share many values with Iranian Shia and clergy.

Iraq has been among the most secular of Arab countries during its short history as a nation-state; however, religion played an increasing role in the late phase of the Baath regime and took on an increasingly dominant role after the fall of Saddam. A key change in the Iraqi domestic situation has been the rise of the Shia as both a demographic and political majority in the new Iraq. Iraqi Shia Ayatollah Sistani issued a Fatwa on 1 October 2004 that instructed citizens to register and vote.³ Shia clergy provided the political organization that brought them to power. The Iranian government and press supported Sistani, Sistani's Fatwa and Shia candidates from the competing Iraqi Shia political parties—the Supreme Council for the Islamic Revolution in Iraq (SCIRI) and Hizb Al-Dawah. Both parties have received financial support and have ties to Iranian intelligence that extend over 25 years. Iran is partial to SCIRI. Iranian President Khatami publicly “praised the role of SCIRI and the position of Grand Ayatollah Ali Sistani on Iraqi issues”.⁴ Supreme Leader of the Islamic Revolution Ayatollah Khamenei stated that “the Iraqi nation and leaders want to hold an election for establishing a popular government derived from the will of the people and for the sake of a free, independent and undivided Iraq....The elections are the means to ending military occupation and the political control of the US and Britain....but the election has a different objective within the fantasies of the occupiers. In the guise of popular elections, they want to impose on the people their own mercenaries, most of whom, on account of past connections with the Baath party, are abject and docile puppets of the occupiers. With the assistance of these mercenaries, the occupiers seek to relieve themselves of the expenditures of military presence and finance them at the cost of Iraqi people and their oil reserves.”⁵

The pro-regime Tehran Times quoted government spokesman Abdollah Ramazanzadeh “we are happy that the election could be held despite the opposition of violent elements, terrorists and certain countries ignorant of democracy”. The Times further cited government Expediency Council Chairman Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani. “The election would never have been possible without the power of the clergy and the religious authorities who urged Iraqi people to participate in elections.”⁶

Iranian reformists match pro-regime support for Iraqi Shias. The reformist Shargh newspaper stated that “the Iraqi election is a very positive event for Iran where the majority of the population is Shia. We should undoubtedly support the Iraqi election since there is a possibility that the Shia will win the election and gain significant political power. At the same time, the United States alliance with the Shias in their struggle against Saddam force the United States to accept the Shias' future influence in Iraqi politics. In short, the Iraqi Shias, Iran and the United States have become an unwitting regional alliance. However, the United States and Iran have very different and contradictory world views about everything except Iraq.”⁷

The regime-supporters and reformers both silently approve of the US operation in the region and see the election as a positive tool that can improve Iranian interests while pushing the large US presence out of the region. A friendly Iraqi state, with a majority Shia population, may help offset Jordan, Israel and even Egypt. Iraq can also provide Iran ready access to Syria and Lebanon. Iranian government officials harshly criticize the US, but do not want to disturb favorable Iraqi political developments. The Iranian reform element further sees US presence as a

catalyst for faster change in the Middle Eastern political and social system and an opportunity to expand Iranian influence over the next decade. Barring hostilities with the US, Iran may be a big winner in Operation Iraqi Freedom. On the other hand, the differences between the Iranian pro-government and reformist factions may provide an opportunity for the US to approach Sistani to serve as an agent of change. The success of an open electoral process in Iraq can call into question the legitimacy of Iran's own elections where the authoritarian intervention of the mullahs denied reformers places on the ballot during last year's parliamentary elections. Sistani's guidance of the political process in Iraq without assuming the role of head of state could become an effective point of comparison with the theocratic structure of the government of Iran where real power lies in the hands of Ayatollah Ali Hoseini-Khamenei, Leader of the Islamic Revolution, and President Mohammad Khatami-Ardakani has seen his hopes for reforms shattered by clerical obstructionism. For the United States this gap that can become a political wedge depending on the success of the democratic process in Iraq offers fertile ground for ideological struggle. At the same time a confrontation over Iranian efforts to procure nuclear weapons could actually strengthen the mullahs' hands by forcing greater national unity in the face of an eminent outside threat from the United States.

Endnotes

[1] "Transcript of State of the Union Address," (2 February 2005),
<http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=4476370>

[2] The inconclusive 1980-1988 Iran-Iraq war resulted in over a million deaths and cost over \$200 billion.

[3] Ayatollah Sistani website <http://www.sistani.org/messages/eng/ente.htm>

[4] "Khatami wishes for a free and developed Iraq", Tehran Times, 5 December 2004,
<http://www.tehrantimes.com/archives.asp>

[5] "Leader's Hajj Message, Knit Ranks to Thwart Imperialist Plots", Kayhan International, 19 January 2005, <http://www.kayhanintl.com/jan19/w1.htm>

[6] "Upbeat about elections, Iran hopes Iraq occupation ends soon", Tehran Times, 1 February 2005, <http://www.tehrantimes.com/archives.asp>

[7] Muhamadreza Sardari, "Iraqi election and Iranian National Interest", Shargh, 3 February 2005, <http://www.sharghnewspaper.com/831115/html1/diplom.htm>